

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH
PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ
INSTITUTIONS**



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I. INTRODUCTION

The term empowerment has been popular in the field of development, especially in reference to women since the mid-eighties. Despite the lack of clear conceptual definition, the construct has widespread uses and is the key focus of development programmes involving women around the world, especially in developing countries. Broadly, a process of building capacities for taking decision about one's own life at an individual and collective level and gaining control over the productive and material resources has generally been termed empowerment. Empowerment is also a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context (Sharma, 1996). Thus empowerment has been conceptualized both as a process and result of that process (Avasthi and Srivastava, 2001). It is manifested as a redistribution of power between different advantaged and disadvantaged classes of population in matters related to social, economic and political aspects and so on so as to establish equality.

In India, various initiatives have been undertaken for improving the socio-economic status and empowering different disadvantaged groups of population, especially women since Independency. For achieving this important objective the Constitution guarantees socio-economic, cultural and political equality and the provision of providing equal rights for availing different opportunities to all social groups of population. Increasing emphasis has also been provided in the past development plans to introduce a variety of women specific development programmes and schemes with an attempt to ensure the maximum participation of women in these programmes so as to strengthen their economic empowerment. At the policy level, various legal reforms and resolutions in the form of social acts have also been introduced to bring improvements in the social empowerment of women.

Over the years, great emphasis has also been laid on the maximization of participation of women in different levels of education so that they may become aware about their rights, responsibilities and social standing and maximize their participation in different social, political and economic activities. The concerned goal has been sought to be achieved through introducing subsidized educational facilities, expansion of girls educational institutions on priority basis,

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developing educational curriculum according to the need and requirements of girls, providing increasing emphasis on the recruitment of women teachers and developing various necessary infrastructural facilities at school level.

The outcome of the various measures undertaken in the past for improving socio-economic status and empowerment of women and thus achieving overall equality among men and women can be well visualized in terms of consistently increasing literacy levels, participation in availing the facility of education and different categories of employment and political activities and development programmes (Banerjee, 1989). However, over the years the overall participation of women in all available opportunities including education and employment is lagging far behind that of their male counterparts. This has been clearly highlighted in the National Human Development Report, 2002. In fact, the women have the disadvantages of around 6 percent in the availment of education with a cumulative inequality of 5 percent against men (Mehta, 1990) and the total disadvantage of women in employment dispress their position to an extent of 68 percent from the point of equality with men (Papola, 1982). The National Human Development Report (2001) also points out that the gender disparity index in India has increased from 0.62 points in 1981 to 0.68 points in 1991.

Prevailing social evils, traditional social system, biased attitude of society and family against women have been recognized as the main factors limiting the scope of women to participate in different socio-economic and political activities and in availing certain opportunities. Now, it has been well accepted that the effectiveness of laws, social reforms and acts may succeed only in a situation when there is social sanction, social acceptance and mass supports in their implementation (Aggrawal and Grover 2001). In this sense, various social evils and cultural backwardness, which are so deep rooted since ages, cannot be removed merely through the introduction of laws and acts. To tackle these problems, Nayyar (1987) advocated introducing certain socially acceptable programmes and approaches. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (1975) felt that lack of adequate planning, co-ordination, inadequate machinery for implementation and resources and multiplicity of agencies have been the major cause of failure of various women specific development programmes and welfare activities, which were introduced in the past. It was generally believed that mere legislation would not be enough for women's development. The legislation and acts have to be backed by proper implementation and strong public supports (Bhagwati, 1985).

On the whole, it has been well realized that the introduction of several laws, social reform acts, constitutional provisions and efforts at maximizing the participation of women in various development programmes is not sufficient for bringing favourable changes in the plight and status of women so as to achieve social and economic empowerment (National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2001). Instead, the social and economic empowerment among women can be better achieved through enhancing their political empowerment. With these considerations, it has increasingly been felt desirable that involving rural women at the grass-root level political institutions and strengthening their partnership at local level political activities

of such institutions, including in certain decision-making processes, would be an important instrument for improving socio-economic status and empowerment of women (Palanithurai, 1994). In view of these assumptions the policy of providing reservation to women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions is an important intervention of the Government to achieve this goal.

Seventy-Third Amendment of the Constitution, which came into force from April 24, 1993, has proposed that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat be reserved for women. This gender-biased reservation policy in favour of women is made applicable even to the number of seats otherwise reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes of women in all the three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Provisions have also been made that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairperson in Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women.

Considering the facts that certain powers are delegated to the Panchayati Raj Institutions and the representatives of Panchayats are politically empowered and accountable to the implementation of various rural development programmes, supervising over the activities of local level public services and government functionaries including the public distribution system, development of infrastructural facilities, and maintenance of community assets it is expected that providing opportunities to women to participate directly in all activities of Panchayats will certainly bring at least some improvement in their socio-economic status and empowerment (Sakuntala, 1999). It is also assumed that involving women in different activities of the Panchayats, especially in decision making processes for implementation of certain development programmes will certainly prove a successful measure for minimising the traditionally accepted gender bias in our social system against the women whereby women are kept under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions in availing certain opportunities and participating in various social, cultural, economic and outdoor activities.

II. OBJECTIVES AND THE METHODOLOGY

The present paper attempts to examine the extent to which the women have benefited in terms of their social and economic empowerment after getting an opportunity to represent the Village Panchayats. Assessment of changes in economic empowerment of women have been carried out by analyzing the extent of changes which have occurred in their personal incomes, occupational mobility, work participation rate and participation in different occupational categories of employment. The changes occurred in achieving social empowerment are examined through analyzing their participation pattern in different social, cultural and political activities and in the household related affairs and general routine of domestic

work, and through assessment regarding the level of changes they have been experiencing in getting social status from the local people while they attend various social and cultural gatherings and festivals. The perceptions of women regarding the factors which have been adversely affecting improvements in their socio-economic empowerment and the kinds of alternatives approaches to be initiated to overcome from these constraints have also been examined.

These objectives of the study were examined through a field study conducted in western and eastern regions of the state, which show different characteristics in relation to the pattern of socio-economic development, social status of women and the participation of women in employment, availing education and political activities. The former region is economically more developed and the literacy rate of women is higher than in the latter region. The latter region has an edge over the former as far as the work participation rate and political awareness among women is concerned. Accordingly, one district from each region, Gorakhpur from eastern region and Saharanpur from western region, both having similar rate of work participation and literacy among rural women were identified for the study. Thereafter, the selection of two blocks from each district through applying similar criteria as adopted for the selection of districts, was undertaken. And finally, we covered all the 93 women-headed village panchayats, represented by similar number of women Pradhans and 404 women members, from the selected block Panchayats. The required information from all women pradhans and members was collected with the help of specially designed interview schedules.

III. CHANGES IN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Generally, the economic activities of different categories including, agricultural operations, are mainly performed by men and to a certain extent by women belonging to lower castes and low income groups of households in both the regions. The participation of upper strata women is limited upto the rearing of children and animals and several household related activities. By and large, the women in eastern region have relatively higher level of freedom to move outside households and to participate in different economic, social, cultural and political activities as compared to women in western region. As a result, the work participation rate among women in former region is higher (11.59 per cent) than in the other region (3.81 per cent) (Mehta, 2002). The western region is economically more developed and the proportion of population under poverty situation is relatively at lower level as compared to eastern region. A large proportion of rural women in eastern region are compelled to participate in labour force due to economic pressure (Jose, 1989).

A significant level of change in the work participation rates, occupation mobility and income level of women after representing Village Panchayats has been seen in both the districts. The work participation rate of Pradhans has increased from 5.38 per cent to 9.68 per cent

and for members it has increased from 15.69 per cent to 18.07 per cent after joining the Panchayats. However, it appears that the proportions of women who were engaged in different economic activities prior to representing Village Panchayats were relatively higher in Saharanpur as compared to Gorakhpur. Still the work participation rate of both women Pradhans and women Members is higher in Saharanpur than in Gorakhpur. But, on the whole, the women members are participating in performing different economic activities as compared to women Pradhans in both the districts.

Table 1: Changes in Work Participation and Occupational Structure after Representing Panchayats
(Numbers)

| Occupation/Status of Work | PRADHANS | | | | MEMBERS | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | SAHARANPUR | | GORAKHPUR | | SAHARANPUR | | GORAKHPUR | |
| | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After |
| Housewife | 48 (94.12) | 45 (88.24) | 40 (95.24) | 39 (92.86) | 181 (83.41) | 183 (84.33) | 160 (85.57) | 148 (79.15) |
| Cultivator | 2 (3.92) | 5 (9.80) | 1 (2.38) | 1 (2.38) | 10 (4.61) | 15 (6.91) | 15 (8.02) | 24 (12.83) |
| Labour | 1 (1.96) | 1 (1.96) | 1 (2.38) | 1 (2.38) | 26 (11.98) | 19 (8.76) | 11 (5.88) | 12 (6.42) |
| Business | -- | -- | -- | 1 (2.38) | -- | -- | 1 (0.53) | 3 (0.74) |
| Total | 51 (100.0) | 51 (100.0) | 42 (100.0) | 42 (100.0) | 217 (100.0) | 217 (100.0) | 187 (100.0) | 187 (100.0) |
| Work Participation Rate | 5.88 | 11.76 | 4.76 | 7.04 | 16.69 | 15.67 | 14.43 | 19.99 |

Source: Field Survey.

The analysis connected to occupational structure of Pradhans and Members revealed that a overwhelming majority of both Pradhans (94.62 per cent) as well Members (84.40 per cent) were earlier engaged in household related non-economic activities as housewives while merely 3.23 per cent Pradhans and 6.19 per cent members were engaged on their family farms prior to representing Village Panchayats. It is good to see that 37 women, comprising 26 in Saharanpur and 11 in Gorakhpur who were working as agricultural labourers on the farm of local landlords have availed the opportunity to represent village panchayats.

Further, the analysis revealed that only 3.26 per cent of women have moved from undertaking household related indoor activities to the performing of certain activities related to their family enterprises, including farming activities after representing village panchayats. As a consequence the proportion of women engaged in agricultural activities has increased from 4.61 per cent to 6.91 per cent and the proportions of women working as housewives has declined by 3.27 per cent with a fairly larger shift of over 61 per cent women in joining their family farming activities. A significant fact is that over 16 per cent of the women have left undertaking wage paid employment on daily basis and has either joined their family business or established own retail shops.

The shifts in the occupational structure of both Pradhans and members after representing the village Panchayats have resulted in a significant increase in their personal income level. The average monthly income of Pradhans has increased from Rs.670 to Rs.1000, showing an increase of 49.25 per cent while in the case of members it has increased from Rs.420 to Rs.631, showing an increase of 49.63 per cent. The increase of income has been indicated largely in the cases of women who were engaged in agricultural activities in both the districts but the amount of earnings being generated through the establishment of own shops was estimated to be relatively much higher than from agricultural and other occupations. The average monthly income of Pradhans in Saharanpur (71.53 per cent) has increased at much higher level than in Gorakhpur (36.90 per cent). But, the situation was marginally different in the cases of members between these two districts, as the income of members in former district has increased at lower level (54.34 per cent) than in latter district (71.43 per cent).

Table 2 : Changes in Personal Earnings

| Occupation | (Per Individual Monthly Earning in Rs.) | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|---|-------|-----------|-------|------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | PRADHANS | | | | MEMBERS | | | |
| | SAHARANPUR | | GORAKHPUR | | SAHARANPUR | | GORAKHPUR | |
| | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After | Before | After |
| Cultivator | 900 | 1140 | 450 | 500 | 489 | 1015 | 349 | 471 |
| Labour | 500 | 600 | 600 | 750 | 410 | 525 | 337 | 495 |
| Business | — | — | — | 1450 | — | — | — | 1200 |
| Service | — | — | — | — | — | — | 410 | — |
| All Occupations | 767 | 1050 | 525 | 900 | 432 | 741 | 346 | 534 |

Source: Field Survey.

In fact, the average earning level of women, both for Pradhans and Members, was already higher in Saharanpur than their women counterparts in Gorakhpur before representing Village Panchayats. In all, it is quite evident that providing an opportunity to women to represent Village Panchayats has given them at least some degree of freedom to participate in certain economic activities as per their choice and to improve their economic status. A sizeable numbers of both Pradhans and Members who were earlier restricted to move outside their households due the deeply rooted social and cultural factors, are currently engaged in their family enterprises. In fact a few of them have been able to develop entrepreneurship capability so as to establish small shops. Also, sizeable proportions of women no longer engage in low status occupations.

IV. CHANGES IN ASSOCIATING WITH SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Analysis of the extent of changes experienced in the participation of women in different social and political activities after representing Panchayats revealed that hardly any woman was associated with any political party prior to representing Panchayats, but latter four Pradhans in Gorakhpur have received the opportunity to become member of national level political parties. And, 3.82 per cent PRI's representatives (8.60 per cent Pradhans and 2.72 per cent members) were associated with the activities of local level social institutions, mainly Mahila Yuvak Mangal Dal, before getting elected as the representatives of village Panchayats. The proportion of Pradhans who were associated with different political and social organizations before representing PRI's were significantly higher than that of the members in both the districts. Among Pradhans, the corresponding ratio was relatively larger in favour of Saharanpur (9.80 per cent) than the Gorakhpur (7.14 per cent). Further we found that 5 Pradhans and 3 members have associated themselves with different social and political organizations after representing village Panchayats. Significant increase in the participation rate of women Pradhans in different political and social activities has been witnessed in both the districts (5.88 per cent in Saharanpur and 4.76 per cent in Gorakhpur) but it has declined from 2.77 per cent to 0.92 per cent for members in Saharanpur as against 3.74 per cent increase for their counterpart in Gorakhpur after associating themselves with the village Panchayats.

Table 3 : Association with Social and Political Institutions Before and After Joining PRIs

| | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|----------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total |
| Before joining PRI's | 5 (9.80) | 6 (2.77) | 11 (4.10) | 3 (7.14) | 5 (2.67) | 8 (3.49) | 8 (8.60) | 11 (2.72) | 19 (3.82) |
| After joining PRI's | 8 (15.69) | 2 (0.92) | 10 (3.73) | 5 (11.91) | 12 (6.42) | 17 (7.43) | 13 (13.98) | 14 (3.47) | 27 (5.43) |
| Non Participants | 38 (74.51) | 209 (96.31) | 247 (92.17) | 34 (80.95) | 170 (90.91) | 204 (89.08) | 72 (77.42) | 379 (93.81) | 451 (90.75) |
| TOTAL | 51 (100.0) | 217 (100.0) | 268 (100.0) | 42 (100.0) | 187 (100.0) | 229 (100.0) | 93 (100.0) | 404 (100.0) | 497 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

V. CHANGES IN SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

The nature and extent of respect and honour which the women representatives of village Panchayats have attained through participating in different local level social and cultural activities mainly depends upon the reputation they have achieved by performing welfare and development activities and in bringing improvements in the socio-economic conditions of different segments of population in their village Panchayats. Over one third of both Pradhans as well as members of different Village Panchayats had availed the opportunity of getting some improvements in their social standings through participating in various local level social and cultural activities after representing the village Panchayats.

Among Pradhans a very high proportion had improved their social status through participation in the social ceremonies (50.54 per cent) followed by 48.39 per cent through participating in the local functions. Also 7.53 per cent were involved in matter related to disputes and conflicts, which occurred among the people of concerned village Panchayats. On the whole, among the women Pradhans who reported having experienced at least some improvements in their social status after representing PRI's was higher in district Saharanpur than in district Gorakhpur. It has found that relatively a higher proportions of women members as compared to women Pradhans have been in a position to improve their social empowerment through participation in local level cultural programmes and social ceremonies in the case of both the districts. Although, fairly a highest proportions of them have improved their social status through participating in local level functions (50 per cent) followed by local festivals and melas

Table 4(A) : Pradhans Reporting Improvements in Social Status through Participation in Different Local Level Social Activities

| OCCASIONS | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | YES | NO | TOTAL | YES | NO | TOTAL | YES | No | Total |
| Marriage and Social Ceremonies | 29 (56.86) | 22 (43.14) | 51 (100.0) | 18 (42.86) | 24 (57.14) | 42 (100.0) | 47 (50.54) | 46 (49.46) | 93 (100.0) |
| Village Functions | 29 (56.86) | 22 (43.14) | 51 (100.0) | 16 (38.10) | 26 (61.90) | 42 (100.0) | 45 (48.39) | 48 (51.61) | 93 (100.0) |
| Disputes | 4 (7.84) | 47 (92.16) | 51 (100.0) | 3 (7.14) | 39 (72.86) | 42 (100.0) | 7 (7.53) | 86 (42.97) | 93 (100.0) |
| Cultural Programmes | 12 (23.53) | 39 (76.47) | 51 (100.0) | 16 (38.10) | 26 (61.90) | 42 (100.0) | 28 (30.11) | 65 (69.89) | 93 (100.0) |
| Festivals | 16 (31.37) | 35 (68.63) | 51 (100.0) | 8 (19.05) | 34 (80.95) | 42 (100.0) | 24 (25.81) | 69 (74.19) | 93 (100.0) |
| Average | 18 (35.29) | 33 (64.71) | 51 (100.0) | 12 (40.00) | 30 (60.00) | 42 (100.0) | 30 (32.26) | 63 (67.74) | 93 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

Table 4(B) : Members Reporting Improvements in Social Status through Participation in Different Local Level Social Activities

| OCCASIONS | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | YES | NO | TOTAL | YES | NO | TOTAL | YES | No | Total |
| Marriage and Social Ceremonies | 94 (43.32) | 123 (56.68) | 217 (100.0) | 61 (32.62) | 126 (67.38) | 187 (100.0) | 155 (38.37) | 249 (61.63) | 404 (100.0) |
| Village Functions | 107 (49.31) | 110 (50.69) | 217 (100.0) | 95 (50.80) | 92 (49.20) | 187 (100.0) | 202 (50.00) | 202 (50.00) | 404 (100.0) |
| Disputes | 2 (0.92) | 215 (99.08) | 217 (100.0) | 16 (8.56) | 171 (91.44) | 187 (100.0) | 18 (4.46) | 386 (95.54) | 404 (100.0) |
| Cultural Programme | 88 (40.55) | 129 (59.45) | 217 (100.0) | 87 (46.52) | 100 (53.48) | 187 (100.0) | 175 (43.32) | 229 (56.68) | 404 (100.0) |
| Festivals | 101 (46.54) | 116 (53.46) | 217 (100.0) | 92 (49.20) | 95 (50.80) | 187 (100.0) | 193 (47.77) | 211 (52.23) | 404 (100.0) |
| Average | 78 (35.94) | 139 (64.04) | 217 (100.0) | 70 (37.43) | 117 (62.57) | 187 (100.0) | 148 (36.63) | 256 (63.37) | 404 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

(47.77 per cent) and cultural programmes (43.32 per cent) in both the districts together. The perceptions of both Pradhans and Members were that the men population generally provides better extent of honour and social respect than the women to them in different local level ceremonies and functions. In general, the women segment were observed hardly take any initiatives even to come close with both Pradhan and members in most of the functions excepting in the cases of arising conflicts and disputes among their families.

VI. CHANGES EXPERIENCED IN THE PARTICIPATION OF HOUSEHOLD'S AFFAIRS

Analyzing the pattern and extent of changes which have occurred in the participation of Pradhans and members in different activities and the affairs of their households as a result of getting an opportunity to represent village Panchayats it is revealed that there has not been any significant change in performing the routine of work related to household affairs, such as, looking after their children, old family members and animals and cooking as well as washing cloth.

This is so all the Pradhans and members of different village Panchayats are regularly engaged in these household related activities in both the districts. Also, a very large percentage of both Pradhans (78.49 per cent) as well as members (90.59 per cent) had reported that they did not experience any kind of changes occurred in performing the activities and involving themselves in the affairs of their households after electing the representatives of concerned

PRI's. However, the proportions of women Pradhans those experienced at least some extent of changes in this regard were significantly larger in Saharanpur (23.53 per cent) as compared to Gorakhpur (19.05 per cent). But in the cases of the members the concerned proportions were almost at similar level in both the districts. The women Pradhans in Saharanpur have improved their participation largely in agricultural activities (11.83 per cent) while in Gorakhpur a highest proportion of them have received the opportunity to participate in decision making process of their family affairs and the freedom to participate in the locally organised social and cultural functions (11.90 per cent). Among Pradhans, those who have achieved favourable changes in decision-making processes on various household matters were reported relatively higher in Saharanpur (11.76 per cent) than in Gorakhpur (9.52 per cent). But only 5.23 per cent of women, comprising 7.53 per cent Pradhans and 4.70 per cent members have received the freedom to spend their own earnings as per their choice.

Similarly, among the women members 7.37 per cent in Saharanpur and 6.42 per cent in Gorakhpur have benefitted by getting the opportunity of visiting nearby markets for the purpose of attending melas and cultural programmes and to purchase certain commodities for their households. Around 4 per cent of women (9 per cent among Pradhans as against 2 per cent members) have started involving themselves in undertaking financial decisions of their families.

Table 5: Extent of Changes Experienced in the Affairs of Family

| TYPE OF CHANGES | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|---|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total |
| Child Care and related household Activities | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Participation in Agriculture | 9 (17.65) | 11 (5.07) | 20 (7.76) | 2 (4.76) | 9 (4.81) | 11 (4.80) | 11 (11.83) | 20 (4.95) | 31 (6.24) |
| Participation in family Business | 1 (1.96) | 2 (0.92) | 3 (1.12) | 2 (4.76) | 2 (1.07) | 4 (1.45) | 3 (3.23) | 4 (0.99) | 7 (1.41) |
| Deciding Family Affairs | 6 (11.76) | 13 (5.99) | 19 (7.09) | 4 (9.52) | 10 (5.34) | 14 (6.11) | 10 (10.75) | 23 (5.69) | 33 (6.64) |
| Decision in the Expenses of Family | 4 (7.84) | 3 (1.38) | 7 (2.61) | 5 (11.90) | 6 (3.21) | 11 (4.80) | 9 (9.68) | 9 (2.23) | 18 (3.62) |
| Freedom to spent own Income | 4 (7.84) | 11 (5.07) | 15 (5.60) | 3 (7.14) | 8 (4.28) | 11 (4.80) | 7 (7.53) | 19 (4.70) | 26 (5.23) |
| Freedom to move outside Village | 7 (13.73) | 5 (2.30) | 12 (4.48) | 4 (9.52) | 6 (3.21) | 10 (4.37) | 11 (11.83) | 11 (2.72) | 22 (4.43) |
| Participation in functions | 2 (3.92) | 13 (5.99) | 15 (5.60) | 5 (11.90) | 11 (5.88) | 16 (6.99) | 7 (7.53) | 24 (5.94) | 31 (6.24) |
| Visiting Markets | 7 (13.73) | 16 (7.37) | 23 (8.58) | 3 (7.14) | 12 (6.42) | 15 (6.55) | 10 (10.75) | 28 (6.93) | 38 (7.65) |
| No Change | 39 (76.47) | 196 (90.32) | 235 (87.69) | 34 (80.95) | 170 (90.91) | 204 (89.08) | 73 (78.49) | 316 (90.59) | 439 (88.33) |
| Total Sample | 51 (100.0) | 217 (100.0) | 268 (100.0) | 42 (100.0) | 187 (100.0) | 229 (100.0) | 93 (100.0) | 404 (100.0) | 497 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

VII. FACTORS LIMITING IMPROVEMENTS IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The respondents provided various explanations about the factors which have been directly or indirectly limiting the scope of increasing participation of women in different activities. The observations of the highest proportion of women (31.39 per cent), comprising 15.05 per cent Pradhans and 35.15 per cent members were that the excessive domination of men in every type of activity is the most important factor which has restricted them from bringing improvements in their socio-economic status. The respondents who complained about such practical problems were found significantly larger in Saharanpur (42.91 per cent) as compared to Gorakhpur (17.90 per cent). Prevailing illiteracy among them and lack of freedom and motivation from the family members for carrying out certain activities were found as the second major problem restricting one-fourth of the representatives of different village Panchayats for making any initiatives to improve their social status. However, another 21 per cent of women, comprising 27.96 per cent Pradhans and 19.31 per cent members, were lacking knowledge about their rights, functions and duties as provided under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The proportion of Pradhans lacking awareness was comparably much higher in Gorakhpur (38.10 per cent) than in Saharanpur (19.61 per cent), but the corresponding percentage of members was relatively higher in latter district (20.74 per cent) than in the former one (17.65 per cent). The problems such as lack of leadership quality among the women, lack of initiative on the part of the Block Panchayats for organizing training programmes for educating women representatives of PRI's about their rights and duties and to introduce sufficient numbers of women related development programmes and welfare activities and the representation of relatively less qualified women in different village Panchayats were also mentioned as other main factors which were responsible for lack of improvement in the socio-economic status of women representatives of different village Panchayats in both the districts. Around 17 per cent women, 18.34 per cent from Gorakhpur and 17.16 per cent from Saharanpur were of the view that the introduction of various women related development programmes and maximizing the participation of both local women and the women representatives of PRI's in different stages of the implementation of concerned programmes will certainly prove as an important measure for improving the socio-economic status of women (Table 6).

Table 6 : Factors Restricting Improvements In Socio-Economic Empowerment

| REASONS | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|---|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total |
| Lack of Education | 18 (35.29) | 56 (25.81) | 74 (27.61) | 11 (26.19) | 36 (19.25) | 47 (20.52) | 29 (31.18) | 92 (22.77) | 121 (24.35) |
| Lack of Motivation by family members | 12 (23.53) | 66 (30.41) | 84 (29.10) | 8 (19.05) | 35 (18.72) | 43 (18.78) | 20 (21.51) | 101 (25.00) | 121 (24.35) |
| Lacking knowledge about their right function | 10 (19.61) | 45 (20.74) | 55 (20.52) | 16 (38.10) | 33 (17.65) | 49 (21.40) | 26 (27.96) | 78 (19.31) | 104 (20.92) |
| Lack of leadership quality | 9 (17.65) | 20 (9.22) | 29 (10.82) | 5 (11.90) | 35 (18.72) | 40 (17.47) | 14 (15.05) | 55 (13.61) | 69 (13.88) |
| Domination of men and rich people | 7 (13.73) | 108 (49.77) | 115 (42.91) | 7 (16.67) | 34 (18.18) | 41 (17.90) | 14 (15.05) | 142 (35.15) | 156 (31.39) |
| Need To identify qualified women for PRI's | 5 (9.80) | 46 (21.20) | 51 (19.03) | 6 (14.29) | 13 (6.95) | 19 (8.30) | 11 (11.83) | 59 (14.60) | 70 (14.08) |
| Lack of Initiatives to introduce women related development Programmes | 5 (9.80) | 41 (18.89) | 46 (17.16) | 11 (26.19) | 31 (16.58) | 42 (18.34) | 16 (17.20) | 72 (17.82) | 88 (17.71) |
| Inadequate training from the Administrator | 4 (7.84) | 6 (2.76) | 10 (3.73) | 4 (9.52) | 3 (1.60) | 7 (3.06) | 8 (8.60) | 9 (2.23) | 17 (3.42) |
| Total Sample | 51 (100.0) | 217 (100.0) | 268 (100.0) | 42 (100.0) | 187 (100.0) | 229 (100.0) | 93 (100.0) | 404 (100.0) | 497 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

VIII. EXPECTATIONS FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH RESERVATION IN PRIs

Finally, we attempted to enquire from the Pradhans and members about their views and perceptions regarding the extent and level to which the recently introduced reservation policy in favour of women in different tiers of Panchayats could be a successful measure of Government inventions in bringing improvements in the socio-economic status and empowerment of women in rural areas in the near future. Analyzing the responses of the women PRI's in this regard we found that a majority of around 62 per cent women, comprising 59.14 per cent Pradhans and 62.62 per cent members, had the impression that in the prevailing social and cultural values and paternalistic attitude of men against women in all respects the proposed policy of reservation of seats for women candidates in Panchayati Raj System would hardly be a successful measure for achieving improvement in socio-economic conditions and empowerment of women at the level of village Panchayats.

Table 7(a) : Perception of Pradhans about Improving Empowerment through Reservation in PRIs in the Future

| LEVEL OF EDUCATION | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Yes | No | Total | Yes | No | Total | Yes | No | Total |
| Illiterate | 7 (30.43) | 16 (69.57) | 23 (100.0) | 2 (40.00) | 3 (60.00) | 5 (100.0) | 9 (32.14) | 19 (67.86) | 28 (100.0) |
| Literate | 6 (42.86) | 8 (57.14) | 14 (100.0) | 7 (35.00) | 13 (65.00) | 20 (100.0) | 13 (38.24) | 21 (61.76) | 34 (100.0) |
| Primary | 4 (57.14) | 3 (42.86) | 7 (100.0) | 3 (33.33) | 6 (66.67) | 9 (100.0) | 7 (43.75) | 9 (56.25) | 16 (100.0) |
| Middle | 3 (60.00) | 2 (40.00) | 5 (100.0) | 2 (50.00) | 2 (50.00) | 4 (100.0) | 5 (55.56) | 4 (44.44) | 9 (100.0) |
| Secondary | 1 (50.00) | 1 (50.000) | 2 (100.0) | 3 (75.00) | 1 (25.000) | 4 (100.0) | 4 (66.67) | 2 (33.33) | 6 (100.0) |
| Total Sample | 21 (41.18) | 30 (58.82) | 51 (100.0) | 17 (40.48) | 25 (59.52) | 42 (100.0) | 38 (40.86) | 55 (59.14) | 93 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

Table 7 (b) : Perception of Members about Improving Empowerment through Reservation in PRIs in the Future

| LEVEL OF EDUCATION | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Yes | No | Total | Yes | No | Total | Yes | No | Total |
| Illiterate | 53 (34.19) | 102 (65.81) | 155 (100.0) | 50 (39.06) | 78 (60.94) | 128 (100.0) | 103 (36.40) | 180 (63.60) | 283 (100.0) |
| Literate | 9 (31.03) | 20 (68.97) | 29 (100.0) | 11 (35.48) | 20 (64.52) | 31 (100.0) | 20 (33.330) | 40 (66.67) | 60 (100.0) |
| Primary | 9 (37.5) | 15 (62.5) | 24 (100.0) | 7 (53.85) | 6 (46.15) | 13 (100.0) | 16 (43.24) | 21 (56.76) | 37 (100.0) |
| Middle | 3 (42.86) | 4 (57.14) | 7 (100.0) | 3 (42.86) | 4 (57.14) | 7 (100.0) | 6 (42.86) | 8 (57.14) | 14 (100.0) |
| Secondary | 1 (50.00) | 1 (50.000) | 2 (100.0) | 4 (57.14) | 3 (42.86) | 7 (100.0) | 5 (55.56) | 4 (44.44) | 9 (100.0) |
| Graduate | - | - | - | 1 (100.0) | - | 1 (100.0) | 1 (100.0) | - | 1 (100.0) |
| Total Sample | 75 (34.56) | 142 (65.44) | 217 (100.0) | 76 (40.64) | 111 (59.36) | 187 (100.0) | 151 (37.38) | 253 (62.62) | 404 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

On the whole, the picture which emerges shows a pessimistic attitude displayed by the Pradhans as well as members of PRI's regarding their socio-economic position as a result of the intervention of Governments in the form of initiation of reservation policy. This pessimistic attitude was the result of the perception of those women who were illiterate and who account

for 60.56 per cent of our sample. However, as we move up from the illiterate to the literate category we find that higher the educational attainment greater is the feeling among them that the reservation policy will certainly bring about an improvement in their socio-economic status and empowerment. For instance, among the literates only 32 per cent felt that their condition is likely to improve, but as we look at those women who have educational level up to secondary and higher levels their percentage is as high as 66.67 per cent and 60 per cent respectively among Pradhans and the members.

IX. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

Lastly, we attempted to know the views and suggestions of the Pradhans and members of sample PRI's about what kinds of alternative initiatives would be more appropriate in future regarding bringing possible improvements in the socio-economic status and strengthening empowerment of women. This exercise was carried out through putting certain options in this regard in the form of questions before the respondents. Taking into account the responses of the representatives of PRI's the analysis depicted that significantly a highest proportions of women (78.67 per cent), 80.60 per cent in Saharanpur and 76.42 per cent in Gorakhpur,

Table 8 : Basic Additional Requirements for Improving Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women

| REASONS | NUMBER OF PRADHANS AND MEMBERS | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| | SAHARANPUR | | | GORAKHPUR | | | TOTAL | | |
| | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total | Pradhan | Member | Total |
| To Aware about their Rights and Functions | 43 (84.31) | 173 (79.72) | 216 (80.60) | 36 (85.71) | 139 (74.33) | 175 (76.42) | 79 (84.95) | 312 (77.23) | 391 (78.67) |
| Involving local people in the implementation of Reservation policy for women candidates | 33 (64.71) | 128 (58.99) | 161 (68.07) | 29 (69.05) | 135 (72.19) | 164 (71.62) | 62 (66.67) | 263 (65.10) | 315 (63.38) |
| Bringing changes in the attitude and ill feelings of Men against Women | 26 (50.98) | 153 (70.51) | 179 (66.79) | 16 (38.10) | 127 (67.91) | 143 (62.45) | 42 (45.16) | 280 (69.31) | 322 (64.79) |
| Abolition of Traditional/ Social/ Cultural System | 35 (68.63) | 144 (66.36) | 179 (66.79) | 20 (47.62) | 119 (63.64) | 139 (60.70) | 55 (59.14) | 263 (65.10) | 318 (63.98) |
| Change in the Criteria for Identification of Reserved PRI's/ Constitutions | 34 (66.67) | 115 (53.00) | 149 (55.60) | 26 (61.90) | 107 (57.22) | 133 (58.08) | 60 (64.52) | 222 (54.95) | 282 (56.74) |
| Reducing Family's Work Load | 21 (41.18) | 122 (56.22) | 143 (53.36) | 19 (45.24) | 111 (59.36) | 130 (56.77) | 40 (43.01) | 233 (57.67) | 273 (54.93) |
| Securing Compulsory Participation of Women PRI's in the meetings | 37 (72.55) | 143 (65.90) | 180 (67.16) | 30 (71.43) | 120 (64.17) | 150 (65.50) | 67 (72.04) | 263 (65.10) | 330 (66.40) |
| Initiating more welfare Schemes for Women | 33 (64.71) | 143 (65.90) | 176 (65.67) | 24 (57.14) | 106 (56.68) | 130 (56.77) | 57 (61.29) | 249 (61.63) | 306 (61.57) |
| Frequently holding of meeting of village and Block Panchayats | 24 (47.06) | 129 (59.45) | 153 (57.09) | 22 (52.38) | 89 (47.59) | 111 (48.47) | 46 (49.46) | 218 (53.96) | 264 (53.12) |
| Allotting more schemes/funds to women headed PRI's | 27 (52.94) | 104 (47.93) | 131 (48.88) | 18 (42.86) | 89 (47.59) | 107 (46.72) | 45 (48.39) | 193 (47.77) | 238 (47.89) |
| Frequently Organizing Social Functions | 28 (54.90) | 107 (49.31) | 135 (50.37) | 13 (30.95) | 122 (65.24) | 135 (58.95) | 41 (44.09) | 229 (56.68) | 270 (54.33) |
| Average | 31 (60.78) | 133 (61.29) | 164 (61.19) | 23 (54.76) | 115 (61.50) | 138 (60.26) | 54 (58.06) | 248 (61.39) | 302 (60.76) |
| Total Sample | 51 (100.0) | 217 (100.0) | 268 (100.0) | 42 (100.0) | 187 (100.0) | 229 (100.0) | 93 (100.0) | 404 (100.0) | 497 (100.0) |

Source: Field Survey.

had suggested taking concrete initiatives for bringing universal awareness among women representatives of PRI's about their rights, functions and duties which are constitutionally provided under the Panchayati Raj Act. A majority of women recommended that the participation of every women representatives of village Panchayats in the meetings of both Block Panchayats and village Panchayats should be made compulsory and mandatory (66.40 per cent). The understanding of another 64.79 per cent women was that the changes in the social status of women cannot be brought about unless some concrete efforts are undertaken for changing the attitude and ill feelings of men against women, while 63 per cent of them suggested that at least some measures should be undertaken at the policy level by the Government for reducing the problems of social, cultural and religious backwardness in rural areas which have been limiting the scope of women in participating different activities according to their choice for last several decades.

Moreover, during the period of last elections, the formation of village Panchayats and the identification of village Panchayats and its wards for considering under the reservation for women candidates was independently undertaken by the officials and the village extension workers of Block Panchayats without involving the local people. The village Panchayats and wards which were selected as reserved for women were known to the local people through visiting the offices of Block Panchayats only few days before the elections were proposed. Considering these facts in mind around 72 per cent women from Gorakhpur and 60 per cent from Saharanpur had suggested that the participation of local people should be maximized in the implementation of reservation policy and the identification of reserved village Panchayats and wards for women candidates. Beside this, they were in favour of changing the criteria as adopted for the identification of reserved village Panchayats and wards for the women candidates. However, around one half of the women representatives of PRI's had recommended that providing increasing emphasis on the introduction of women related development programmes and welfare activities at village level, frequently holding the meetings of both Block Panchayats and village Panchayats, making efforts to bring reduction in the involvement of women in the household related activities, providing priority on the allocation of higher amounts of funds to the women headed Panchayats as compared to men headed Panchayats, and frequently organising of different social and cultural functions at the village Panchayats level would be the important measures for improving the socio-economic status and empowerment of women in rural areas.

X. CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the deep rooted social evils and cultural backwardness in rural areas along with lack of freedom provided to women by their family members in availing the opportunities to participate in certain social, cultural, political and economic activities, a fairly large proportion of women representatives of PRIs are still lacking the opportunities to participate in outdoor activities, including different development programmes and the activities

of village panchayats. The rights and duties of women Pradhans which are constitutionally assigned to them for strengthening their empowerment are being used by their male wards (Yadav and Grover, 2002). Even certain policy decisions of the village panchayats are being undertaken by male family members on behalf of the women Pradhans. However, the pattern of participation in local level social functions and cultural programmes has considerably increased among both Pradhans and members. As a result their social status among the local people has increased satisfactorily over the years. Shift in the occupational pattern of employment was also revealed among both Pradhans and the members who have now started participating in the agricultural activities of their households through minimising their work load in household activities and leaving less prestigious employment as labourers. Also few of the women have received the opportunity to develop entrepreneurship and have established small shops.

A very low level of change has occurred in the involvement of women in looking after their children, old family members, animals and other household work and the participation in different matters of family affairs, including decisions making on certain issues and freedom to spend own income according to their choice. Illiteracy, lack of motivation and freedom for participating in activities of village panchayats and lack of awareness about their constitutional rights and duties were seen as the most important reasons behind the lack of improvement in the socio-economic status and empowerment of women in different village Panchayats (Suryakanthi, 1997).

The perception of a little over half of the women representatives of PRIs was that providing an opportunity to women for representing Village Panchayats will certainly prove a successful intervention of the Government for bringing social and economic empowerment among women in rural areas in the near future provided that some concrete efforts are undertaken for changing the attitude and ill feelings which prevail among men against women and existing social evils disfavours and limiting the freedom of women for participating in different activities.

Initiatives towards making suitable changes in the criteria fixed for the identification of village panchayats and wards to be reserved for women candidates, maximising the participation of local people especially women in the implementation of reservation policy, giving priority for the initiation of increasing numbers of women specific development programmes with ensuring the participation of women in the different stages of implementation of these programmes and training programmes to promote awareness among women about their constitutional rights and duties were among the most significant options suggested by Pradhans and the Members for achieving desired level of improvement in the socio-economic status and empowerment of women.

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